DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 464 506 FL 027 268

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TITLE	Reading as Comprehension and as Interpretation in Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL).
PUB DATE	2002-04-00
NOTE	14p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	College Students; Critical Thinking; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Instruction; *Second Language Instruction; Short Stories
IDENTIFIERS	Taiwan

ABSTRACT

This study investigated how 12 Taiwanese English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) college students comprehended and interpreted 4 English short stories. Free writing was used to collect the data, and a topical unit was used to analyze the data. The results identified two patterns: the comprehension level and the interpretation level. The comprehension level was divided into three categories: summarizing, elaborating, and inferring. The interpretation level was also divided into three categories: evaluating, associating, and transferring. The comprehension level helped participants understand the text, but the interpretation level helped participants become critical thinkers and readers. The pedagogical implications suggest that ESL/EFL teachers should broaden their views of reading instruction and, furthermore, should provide a rich learning environment for students to make personal, sensible, and meaningful connections through a social inquiry process. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/SM)

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READING AS COMPREHENSION AND AS INTERPRETATION IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREING LANGAUGE (EFL)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how twelve Taiwanese EFL college students comprehended and interpreted four English short stories. Free writing was used to collect the data and a topical unit was used to analyze the data. As a result, two patterns were identified: the comprehension level and the interpretation level. The comprehension level was then divided into three categories: summarizing, elaborating, and inferring. The interpretation level was also divided into three separate categories: evaluating, associating, and transferring. The comprehension level assisted participants to understand a text, but the interpretation level helped participants become critical thinkers and readers. The pedagogical implications suggest that ESL/EFL teachers should broaden their views of reading instruction and, furthermore, should provide a rich learning environment for students to make personal, sensible, and meaningful connections through a social inquiry process.

INTRODUCTION

In the past three decades, we have come a long way in the direction of viewing ESL/EFL readers as active, who take responsibility in extracting meaning from texts. The interactional view of reading sees that meaning has been construed to emanate not only from written documents, but from the interactions between the reader and the text. Texts, in this view, serve as guidelines, providing directions to help readers search for meaning. Thus, efficient and effective reading relies not only on readers' linguistic competence and their background knowledge, but also on the extent to which readers are able to connect these two factors (Carrell, Eskey, & Devine, 1989; Devine, Carrell, & Eskey, 1987). However, this view of reading still primarily focuses on how readers reach a correct answer. Behind such a belief, meaning is seen as objective, atomistic, systematic, and portable (Myers, 1988). As a result, reading is valued as a commodity

and texts are the only source of meaning; as a result, textual meaning is the major concern in reading comprehension.

On the other hand, using the transactional view of reading, reading is viewed as an act of sharing--a meeting of minds--between reader and author. The author provides the complete work but doesn't tell the reader what to think about it; the reader must strive to understand and to interpret what the author is saying. It is the reader's interpretive process that is the focus of this shared inquiry (Harste, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1985, 1986). Through interpretation, readers can discover new aspects of the work or even change their initial understanding of it. Therefore, ESL/EFL readers should be encouraged to treat reader-text literacy events as open to new and unique interpretations: each unique context, allows them to use their personal texts as interpretative playgrounds (Chi, 1999). ESL/EFL readers need to be encouraged not to focus primarily on absorbing the greatest amount of text information or, even worse, to know the specific and exact meanings of the text, but to understand that every time a word is used in a new context, it creates new possible meanings.

Based upon the above theoretical beliefs, the purpose of this study was to explore how Taiwanese EFL college students comprehended and interpreted literary texts in their initial encounters. Reading, in this sense, is not only considered as an act of comprehension but also of interpretation. That is, comprehension focuses on readers' ability to understand a text, whereas the locus of interpretation focuses on the process by which readers use the self to learn and inquire beyond the scope of the text (Beach, 1990). In fact, comprehension and interpretation should be viewed as dynamic in which each is supportive of the other (Rosenblatt, 1978). Interpretation occurs not only when readers understand (comprehend) the text, but also when readers do not understand the text. Doubt, ambiguity, conflict, and contradiction may inspire, urge, and propel readers to the interpretive inquiry. When an interpretation is generated, a

reader is able to build on this uncertainty in order to inquire and learn further. Comprehension and interpretation are not just understanding but generative and creative processes.

THE STUDY

Participants and the reading texts: Twelve Taiwanese college students, majoring in English, participated in this study. In general, these students had been exposed to at least six years of junior and senior high school English, taught mainly by the grammar-translation method, and two years of university-level English.

Amy Tan's "*The Joy Luck Club*" was selected as the first reading text for this class due to the richness of its cultural perspective. *The Joy Luck Club* is composed of sixteen short stories that trace the relationships between four mothers and their daughters. In order to avoid being influenced by the instructor's interpretations of the texts, the researcher (the instructor) chose the first four stories, "The Joy Luck Club," "Scar," "Red Candle," and "The Moo Lady" because these stories were assigned reading for the second week of the semester.

Data Collection: Free writing can be used as a tool to investigate how students begin to shape their ideas and to express their thoughts immediately (Belanoff & Fonaine, 1991). In this study, each participant was requested, after reading each story, to write a one- to two-page free response paper without any directions as to how to respond. Each response usually consisted of five to ten paragraphs. Most responses were composed on word processors, although one or two participants sometimes wrote by hand.

Data Analysis: The goal of the study was to identify how participants comprehended and interpreted literary texts. The researcher first divided all of the free written data into two levels: comprehension and interpretation levels. Topic units were then used to group the relevant topic units into categories. That is, the relevant topical

units were grouped together as a category, that reflected a common or recurring perspective. As the researcher identified the sentences comprising each category, the researcher noted the key concepts in the margin. The categories gradually emerged and evolved from the data as this analysis proceeded. As a result, six types of responses, Summarizing, Elaborating, Inferring, Evaluating, Associating, and Transferring, were generated. The definition and example of each category is presented in Table 1, whereas Tables 2 and 3 present the results of each category.

TABLE 1: Definition and Example of Each Type of Response

Category	Definition	Example
Summarizing	Readers state the main ideas of the text.	The story tells about the generation gaps.
Elaborating	Readers rephrase part of the text with different words, but the same sense.	When she fell into the water, she expected her Amah to come immediately. In her heart, she was angry at her Amah.
Inferring	Readers draw a conclusion or make a hypothesis based upon the textual meaning.	The name of the Joy Club changed from Kweilin to America. In Kweilin,... In America...
Evaluating	Readers apply their own value judgments to the events and situations that unfold.	I admire her brevity, wisdom. If not, she will have a miserable life. Her wisdom helps her run away from the control of a man whom she did not love at all.
Associating	Readers apply their personal life and previous textual experience to the current text.	After I read the story, I had to cherish my life. I am very lucky to be in this generation, and I can do what I like to do.
Transferring	Readers use the value of their culture or views of the world to the text being read.	Chinese seldom express their love, but they take actions. The mother cut the meat for Amah. She took actions, not just said it.

TABLE 2: EACH PARTICIPANT'S RESPONSES USED

Participant	Summarizing	Elaborating	Inferring	Evaluating	Associating	Transferring
#1	4	2	6	4	2	3
#2	3	3	6	6	1	1
#3	4	1	5	3	1	2
#4	3	5	6	2	0	2
#5	2	7	3	3	1	2
#6	5	2	3	3	1	3
#7	2	5	2	5	1	2
#8	3	2	2	3	1	7
#9	2	1	7	6	3	4
#10	2	4	3	7	1	7
#11	3	2	3	10	1	2
#12	4	1	2	8	2	2
Total= 233	37	35	48	60	15	38
100%	16%	15%	21%	26%	6%	16%

TABLE 3: TOTAL OF SIX TYPES OF RESPONSES TO FOUR STORIES

Texts / Response Types	The Joy Luck Cub	Scar	Red Candle	The Moon Lady
Summarizing	1	10	10	16
Elaborating	14	5	10	6
Inferring	9	8	22	9
Evaluating	12	9	28	11
Associating	5	2	5	3
Transferring	3	9	20	6
Total	**44**	**43**	**95**	**51**

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tables 2 and 3 summarize the six types of responses that participants made in responding to the four short stories. Given these data it can be said that participants spent almost half of their time comprehending (52%) and half interpreting (48%) the texts. According to how participants responded to the texts, the researcher divided them into two types of readers: comprehension readers (participants #1-#6) and interpretation readers (participants #8-#12). The comprehension readers more often focused on the story lines, gathering information in an attempt to build a textual world, which involved understanding the direct and literal meaning of the text, or was concerned with meaning implied but not directly stated in the text. The interpretation readers more often focused on integrating their opinions to judge or even to criticize what was being read. Most importantly, all participants recursively moved between these two levels, and did not simply focus on one level.

In order to better understand how participants comprehended and interpreted the stories through six types of responses, the following presents a further discussion of the six different types of responses.

Summarizing: The level of difficulty presented by a story appeared to have a strong effect on the responses used. Of the four stories, participants responded that "The Moon Lady" was more difficult to understand because the plot itself was more ambiguous. Participants seemed to employ Summarizing to clarify the ambiguity, of their confusion or even to verify their understanding. Example (1) presents this case.

[Example 1]

This is a very strange story. I am not quite sure what the story means. It seems to tell about an innocent girl. She believes what Amah says. However, the unpleasant event happened in her childhood changes her a lot.

On the other hand, some participants responded that, among the four stories, "Scar" and "Red Candle" were easier to understand, but the frequency of summarizing employed was fairly high. The underlying assumption may be attributed to the reader's belief that comprehension comes first and interpretation follows. Without comprehending a text, interpretation will not occur. Those who have such reading beliefs intended to use Summarizing as a "stepping-stone" to promote their interpretations as indicated in Example 2.

[Example 2]

The story tells about a remarried mother, who was not forgiven by her mother and her daughter. But eventually she was forgiven because she used her action to show her "shyu" [fidelity]. I think we Chinese highly value Shyu as a moral value.

Elaborating: The degree of Elaborating is related to the level of comprehension of the story. Sometimes, participants selected a chunk or some chunks of the texts, and then, by splicing the chunk or chunks into a whole, re-organized and reconstructed the text. That is, comprehending and composing processes occurred concurrently and either could be occasioned by the other as indicated in Example 3. In contrast, Example 4 presents a response, indicating that a participant did not relate old messages to new ones that she was elaborating. She was simply wandering around the texts without any clear reading purpose or direction. Consequently, she even lost herself in the texts.

[Example 3]

Because of the belief and respect toward the moon, her Amah put her in a formal dress and told her about the secret wish to the Moon Lady... Nevertheless, when she was in trouble and wanted to have a wish she found out that her Amah had told her was not true. Her wish did not come true and the Moon Lady never showed up. The Moon Lady was even c man, not a woman as she originally expected. She began to wonder her Ama's words and doubt what she was taught. The little girl's trust toward her Amah was destroyed. Gradually she was unable to trust people after she grew up.

[Example 4]

While reading the story "The Joy Luck Club," I am amused by the author's vivid description of making wanton and p-laying Mah Jong. From the beginning part,

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the mother talked about her Kweilin story and the beautiful scene in Kweilin...the narrator also mentioned some disadvantages of Chinese people such as the strong feelings of place and this made Chinese not able to get together.

Inferring: Inferring is most significantly used in the comprehension level (21%). Since these participants are English majors, titles, metaphors, symbols, and themes have become springboards for them to comprehend a text. Interestingly, participants were more inclined to treat the title of the story as a metaphor in order to attack the text. The following example (Example 5) illustrates this case.

[Example 5]

Scar means memory. The memory of grandma, daughter and mother. The daughter's scar is very obvious. The scar on her neck is also her memory to her mother. Although her scar fades by and by until it is disappeared, her memory never disappears. Grandma's and mother's scars are both invisible. Their scars are in their minds. Grandma's can't forgive her daughter's betrayal that make the whole family "lose face." Even so, she can't deny the fact that she is her daughter. However, their scars disappear with the death of grandma. Maybe the mother is not accepted by other members of the family. At least, she is accepted by her daughter.

Apparently, the participant in Example 5 must have already had an initial understanding of the metaphor "scar," so she was able to build an evolving understanding of the text as she moved toward a more complete understanding of the text. For this participant to sustain her understood perspectives, the title was re-symbolized as a vehicle to transport her from interpreting the text through speculation, analytical hypothesis, and rigorous risk-taking to drawing conclusions or making generalizations. This is the magic of language and how the word "scar" becomes a web of meaning.

Evaluating: Evaluating was the most significant response used by participants (26%). When an evaluation developed in participants' minds, they had the opportunity to integrate their own values, ideas, beliefs and attitudes, and use these opportunities for a manner of self-growth. Through Evaluating, these participants projected themselves into the tales, identifying with, feeling sorrow for, or even sympathizing with the

characters and their encounters; as a result, reflection was promoted and that made them more reflexively conscious of their own life experiences. The following examples illustrate such cases.

[Example 6]

I really enjoy reading this story. When I finished reading this story. I appreciated the narrator very much. Her original way to deal with the marriage makes me think she i; an obedient person, but, finally I admire her as a wise, courageous, and. self-conscious woman. She not only keeps her promise and lets her mother have face, but also saves her life... If I were the girl in The Red Candle, would I be as smart as she? Would I be able to escape this miserable marriage? Would I be able to suffer like her?

[Example 7]

The story makes me think about generation gaps. I don't think generation gaps is good to describe the older and the younger generations. I think generation difference is the better term than generation gaps.

Through the process of Evaluating, readers add richness and the possibilities of various perceptions totexts. Both participants obviously became more involved notonly at the interpretative level, but also in making more in-depth and sophisticated interpretative connections. As a result, they not only tended to bring their own judgments, decisions, values, and concerns to the texts, but also tended to bring new thoughts, self-realizations, or -redefinitions to enrich their interpretations.

Associating: Associating was the least used among the six types of responses (6%). This result demonstrates that EFL readers, while reading, shape and construct their ideas primarily by focusing on the current text, rather than on.intertextualizing the texts previously read or integrating their autobiographical experiences.

Associating usually caused participants to shift their attention away from the text and to focus more on their personal resources. This enabled them to lend a hand in making their own minds. In other words, by using their experiences to come to personal, sensible, and significant meaning, participants refreshed what had already been committed to memory and in turn even shed new light on their previous understanding.

The following examples demonstrate this.

[Example 8]

This story made me think of a Chinese movie I saw or. TV. When I saw that movie, I blamed the son and the daughter-in-law because they are very selfish. They just want to have their own life. But, after I read this story, I can't only blame the young generation.

[Example 9]

I remember that my grandmother told me that if a child pointed to the moon with his finger, his ear would be cut off. That was an example to show Chinese reverence to the moon. I realized what my Amah said was not true after I entered the primary school. Unlike the girl, I still respected my Amah [my grandmother] *and trusted people.*

These two participants in Examples 8 and 9 were not only interested in infusing meanings into the text as a construct, but also in considering the implications of the constructedness of the text and in exploring its connectedness to themselves. That is, participants took their knowledge or what they knew about a topic and recast that knowledge onto another particular context. Such construction was a text-shaping and text-creating process. These new planes changed not only the textual meaning but also the readers.

Transferring: Cultural transference indicated the complexity and significance of two different cultural backgrounds internally intertwined and interactively supporting each other. The English texts functioned as a channel for participants to know about another culture in relationship to their own and this knowledge also helped them better understand their own culture. The interplay of two cultures, the participants' and the writer's, illustrated how the different value systems of readers changed the significance of the unique reading event they experienced. The following example presents this case.

[Example 10]

In fact, many Chinese families won't accept the idea of remarriage. Remarriage means that a woman abandons her remarriage. Remarriage

means that a woman abandons her family and children... A remarried woman may not be forgiven by the family members, especially the elder people. In a Chinese family, a woman belongs to her husband's family, but not to be part of the family...Fortunately, this kind of concept has gradually changed in these days. Many women in Taiwan have become less dependent on their husband...

More importantly, while integrating their native culture to re-interpret the texts, some participants not only revised the lines of the stories, but also found their voice, re-defined their beliefs; in this way, they used reading as a means to outgrow their current selves.

IMPLICATIONS

This study strongly supports the importance for EFL readers to make personal, social and cultural meanings, through which they are able to comprehend and interpret a text more deeply and powerfully. Students need to be encouraged to express themselves and not to merely focus on what is right or wrong because this may serve to make students less confident and less willing to take the risks necessary to construct a personal text.

Second, we usually view the relationship between comprehension and interpretation as linear and assume that the comprehension level must be completed successfully before more complex processes can operate. However, as suggested by this study, the relationship between comprehension and interpretation levels is dynamic and recursive. Thus, teachers should change their view that reading comprehension and interpretation are two distinct linear entities. Instead, they should regard interpretation as a comprehension process. Such a change will enable readers to generate and create their personal meaning.

Last, any text provides a reader with infinite possibilities for comprehension and interpretation, and thus each reader has multiple layers of meaning for each text. All comprehension and interpretation can be seen as text in context. Thus, the teacher can

help students expand the range of meanings by sharing and discussing their reading experiences with other students.

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